

a world beyond knowing by rainsoakedcoat

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Canon-Typical Violence, Eventual Happy Ending, HIV/AIDS, Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con, M/M, Parent Death, Slow Burn, billy's mom passed rather than left, glimpse of billy's Californian life, modern!AU, neil's still a piece of abusive shit, poz!billy

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Neil Hargrove, Original Male Character(s) of Color, Steve Harrington, Susan Hargrove

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

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Summary:

billy was doing fine in california.

until neil chopped down his black walnut tree self & ripped his roots out from the dirt, transplanting them into indiana. he would try his hardest to regrow in the harsh midwestern winter--even if it killed him. he'd rip hawkins apart if he had to.

a world beyond knowing

Author's Note:

can be read as a companion piece to 'warmed.' HIV is not a death sentence like it once was, but that doesn't mean it doesn't impact communities today. if ur interested, check out work by Mykki Blanco and Lou Sullivan, both HIV+ trans people. I'm processing a lot of feelings surrounding illness, particularly HIV, as I have personal experience with loss & grief surrounding AIDS, and the pandemic has drudged up a lot of those feelings!

also i have just graduated college, moved into an apartment, and gotten a new full-time job all in the span of a month, so it has been slow-going with the writing until now. thank you soso much to soph for sticking beside me.

Hawkins, Indiana was never what Billy had wanted. He was never supposed to be forced out of California; he was a black walnut tree saddled with poisonous roots that would infect anyone who might endanger his position. He fought frequently, getting roughed up protecting those he loved, throwing caution to the wind, and throwing beers back. It was all worth it, keeping his supports safe. Billy stuck around for the others. They didn't need him the same way he needed them, but by god, they held him together. Kept him going. His friends were his life, his reason to continue.

It wasn't until Susan came along, with her brown hair and her mousy demeanor, that Neil was willing to do it all. Willing to do anything; to restart; to uproot. All for her. Her daughter, Maxine, was an afterthought, a secondary obligation that, if anything, served to improve his reputation. He was *so good* with her, so kind, so gentle. Nothing like the man Billy knew.

And Billy couldn't help it. His poison wasn't enough to ward off the threat. She was the first one since Billy's mom to put up with Neil's shit long enough to earn his 'devotion.' It was her reward when Billy

got his positive diagnosis, to restart their lives in the Midwest and run away from their tainted reputation back on the coast.

There was so much Billy wanted to keep, so much he wanted to ball up and tuck away inside him, safe beneath his ribs. Billy used to sit on the roof of their house by the coastline and look at the stars, making up his own constellations. Used to pretend he was loved by someone other than Maxine, who looked up at him with the same shining stars he could see at night.

It terrified him to have someone staring up at him with that much love—with any love at all. He wasn't raised on it. He didn't know how to accept it, without his mother around. His friends could leave at any time--Maxine could not. Inevitably, she would be disappointed and disgusted by Billy. There would be no point to allow hopes of them becoming friends to come into her head.

He started screaming at her more, wanting to tear down the image she had of him. It'd be ripped to shreds the moment Billy told her the truth. That he was a faggot, that he was full of the same Lentivirus that had murdered his given mother; stole her away when he was still a child.

Billy was left holding the box; to grapple with the reality that his mother would never take another breath; to cling to the reality that he was the survivor she couldn't be. Maxine deserved to know the truth of his existence, the pain of having been born recently enough to receive treatment that she couldn't have. He was a death sentence walking, forced to remain alive by the managing meds that were invented too late for his mother. He felt her in every step he took, in the way the sun shone through his window when he woke up in the morning, even in the way the rain hit the wood of the boardwalk on a stormy day.

Smiling, small, for himself, Billy would stretch in the morning, staring up at his Metallica poster, proud that he had another day to see the bits and pieces of his mom around him, even while he bit at his cheek, keeping words he could never say to her within himself. He missed her every day; his grief was stronger than his guilt. Jessie had been incredibly strong, her joy and gentle made in equal parts, raising Billy with a lasting love that he would need to maintain

himself in the face of his father's abuse.

For years, even when Jessie was around, Neil would do his best to destroy Billy with anything he had, whether that was his belt, his boot, or his hand. Nothing was ever good enough for the man, his mustache twitching with the muscles in his face every time he made to punish his son. Jessie would always cower away, doing her best to recover from her own abuse. Watching, Billy did his best to fight back, if not for himself then for his mother always. It made the beatings that much worse.

Neil had his special means of torturing Billy—reminding him that his original sin was his entire existence, which Billy never forgot, ever. Neil had wanted Billy dead the moment he had held him as an infant, despite his initial encouragement that Jessie carry him to term. (Billy would learn this through bits and pieces, as he parsed the truth in the verbal onslaughts and the diary that his mother left behind.)

After some time, Billy realized it was better to just quit fighting back. As Jessie grew weaker, Billy received worse beatings, and Neil became more and more unhinged, screaming in supermarkets, on the boardwalk, in drive-ins. That was when Billy knew it was coming to an end—their delicate little domesticity, their tiny family bubble. Neil gave up on maintaining their reputation, and Billy cried more and more, afraid both of becoming a statistic if he were to be removed from his home, but also terrified of what it meant to lose his mother and remain alone with his father.

Eventually, Jessie was admitted to the hospital for long-term care, and Billy clutched at her sheets, knowing that it was over when Jessie pressed a hand to Billy's forehead, brushing hair from his face. She had told him she was glad she had pierced his ears as a child, because it suited him so very well, that she was glad they had driven to a nearby amusement park when he was six, that she was glad they had been to the beach just that summer, celebrating his fourteenth birthday, glad that she had done all she could under Neil's thumb. Billy remembers. Billy remembers. Billy remembers.

Billy remembers pressing a kiss to her forehead, holding her hand to his chest, tears dripping onto his shirt. She had smiled with her wan smile, her eyes somehow still bright and beautiful, and Billy had

nearly collapsed at the terror of a world without that face. He was just a boy, wishing with his entire heart for a world that wouldn't be so cruel, for the inertia, the inevitable, to give up the way he and his father had done. But the world was cruel, and cold, and he was left behind, tears streaming down his face.

He'd committed the scene to memory—by the time the evening was coming to a close, Jessie Hargrove had moved on to the other side, her son and her sister by her bedside. Billy would never forget the doctors running in, with the intention of restarting her heart. He watched them do their best, as Jessie's sister held him close. Neil had stayed home, refusing to visit Jessie when her condition deteriorated permanently; Billy was left with a woman he had only seen snippets of growing up, a woman softened with time. She had stayed at a local hotel for the funeral arrangements, only to leave soon afterward for work obligations. She had at least taken the time to wish Billy well before leaving him alone with his father.

Once the funeral was over, Billy was beaten within an inch of his life after Neil was able to pry his fingers from his mother's lifeless hand and be driven home.

He was given a hospital room down the hall from where his mother had left him.

It was after this near-fatal encounter with Neil that the doctors informed Billy of his HIV-positive status. Regardless of the fact that Billy wasn't going to die, he couldn't help but be overwhelmed with guilt over the fact that he remained when she did not. Her condition was different than his; she'd developed AIDS as a result of not receiving treatment early enough.

Billy, with the appropriate help, would live to a ripe age, with a life full of love and freedom--if there was a way out, if he could make it long enough to find it. He felt more trapped than he had in a long time, alone with Neil, at the mercy of his emotional tides; the unpredictability reminded Billy of the waves he surfed in his free time off from school. A piece of Billy died with his mother. Neil seemed to die, too, so infuriated by his son's sheer presence that he couldn't stand to be near him in a house that suddenly felt too large.

Billy's father was convinced Billy was death incarnate, ready to murder any and all that ever came near him. For days after the diagnosis, Neil refused to even breathe the same air as Billy, leaving the room anytime he came around despite the research that said Billy's sweat and tears would be sterile, free of virus. It never was Neil's priority to respect his family, after all.

Billy would always sigh, lighting a cigarette, forcing his shaking hands to quit trembling. He wasn't supposed to smoke on his new medication, but he didn't care. He could barely see out of his double black eyes anyway, his other bruises concealed underneath his muscle tee, ribs cracked from being kicked while he was down, still healing underneath hospital-issued bandages. He wouldn't be attending school for a few days. They'd asked him at the hospital just how he'd so severely managed to injure himself that he had extensive wounds, but he'd shrugged off their questions, saying he'd got scuffed up in a fight, and then fell off his skateboard. They took him at his word, shaking their heads in chastisement.

Two years after Jessie's passing, Neil had moved on to another woman, named Susan. It wasn't long before they got married, soon after Billy's sixteenth birthday. Gifting himself a Camaro from his wages working at the local surf-shop and picking up lifeguarding shifts, Billy was feeling a bit more settled in his skin.

After the two years of navigating a minefield with his father, there were reasons to remain alive: his vibrant, understanding boyfriend, his gaggle of friends, the Pacific Ocean's ice-cold mornings. He'd found ways to get over his pain, including fighting on the side, to the chagrin of his boyfriend, Sean, and drinking himself into a stupor when he was so lonely he could feel it in his bones. The people who loved him couldn't save him from himself, but they chose to remain. Billy had found boys consistently willing to jump him if he got them hot enough. He taught himself to surf after begging his boss to help him out with a free rental. That's how he'd met Sean, the two teenage boys going out surfing early before school and on weekends.

Only a few weeks into Neil and Susan's marriage, there were talks of relocating. It disgusted Billy. They would potentially be moving across the country to escape the reality of what it meant to live with Billy every day, to look upon his face and remember that there was a

life before Susan, a life full of pain and joy alike. It was a small price to pay to force Billy to leave behind his long-term boyfriend and close friends, leaving behind the perfect weather, the huge waves, and ice cream dripping across his fingers—laughter loud as the crashing of the ocean behind them, over and over again.

He'd finally perfected a routine for himself, a way of managing himself and his body in ways that suited him. He was able to conceal Neil's bruises with legitimate bruises from his street fights. Pretend his skin wasn't on fire all the time.

Finally, Susan made up her mind, and it was time for the relocation. Maxine was upset, but wasn't as invested in the coastline as Billy was; she had less to lose, more time to mold herself into whatever their parents needed her to be. Billy cried the day they were forced to up and leave, cramming shirts and posters into a suitcase, promising all of his friends that he'd FaceTime them as soon as humanly possible, the minute he had time alone when they arrived at the new place. It was a punishment for being openly queer—as much as Neil hated his own son, he wanted to keep a tight leash on him, refusing to let him go to San Francisco, or even worse, Los Angeles, to become an actor. So, it was the Midwest instead, packing all of his items and pretending that things were fine so Neil didn't hit him in front of Maxine.

It had taken a long time for Neil to explain what was going on with Billy; he had refused to bring Susan around to the house until he had her wrapped around his little finger. Whatever explanation he gave for his 'discipline,' she would eat up, because he had designed it that way. It was his suggestion that they move, but he convinced Susan that it was her decision, telling her that it would be better to get away from the prying eyes of their neighbors, who *could have been* gossiping about Billy's HIV positive status, but probably weren't.

Billy planned as much stargazing as he could, could look at the moon and think about his little pack of friends looking at the same moon. He could just call his friends, and sit with them out in an abandoned field, sitting on the Camaro's hood, warmed by the engine working. He could pretend it was warm from his friends. They never treated him like a science experiment. He remembers the way they pressed their toes into his calves when laying on the couch together, sharing

blunts like gossip.

Billy's boyfriend would always press kisses to his forehead, gleaming in the dawning sunlight, durag and wetsuit matching. They would surf the waves, concentrated, before school, peeling wetsuits off and changing into school clothes in the bathrooms before homeroom began. Neil didn't care, his son was out of the house.

Sean had helped Billy tighten up his surfing—it was their first date, even if Billy was unaware that it was an official date. Sean had offered to give pointers, probably tired of catching each others' eyes and not doing anything about it, for days on end. He remembers blushing at the way the other boy's face dimpled with his toothy smile, their young selves full of wonder and joy.

It wasn't until Billy took a chance, until he finally leaned in, pressing his mouth to Sean's cheek, reeling back quickly to gauge his reaction, that there was a blossom of hope in Billy's heart for something more. Sean looked at him like he had hung the moon, pressing their salty hands together. The beach was emptied of people, but even if it hadn't been't, Billy would have chosen to do so over and over again, forever and ever, watching the sun rise together until their corneas burned.

Billy cries when he remembers their first date. The feelings trudged up from the memory engross him. He begins to think on their parting conversations. He had told Sean there was no expectation, or obligation, or any of that bullshit, for them to stay together now that they were going to be states away. They cried into each other's arms, desperate for a solution they didn't have. Billy recalls seeing his phone lit up with the notification that Neil was calling and his heart dropping into his stomach. Sean had squeezed him harder as Billy touched his lips to Sean's hair. Billy remembers feeling as though there would be no way out of this grief, this man-made hell. He'd done so well for so long. If Sean broke his ribs, out of desperate love, he'd thank him. At least it'd be something to remember him by.

He thinks back to the time they skated together, down the boardwalk, as he pushed crumpled up dollar bills in his pocket down so they wouldn't fly out, glancing over at his companion. Sean was smiling wide, the wind making his eyes water. The boys were on

their way to get sodas from the corner store, drip-drying from their weekend surfing session.

They had been constantly on edge that month, buzzing with energy. Billy shoved the hair out of his eyes as he eyed the repetitive stores they passed by almost every day. People were living their lives, peeking out of windows, throwing wet clothes onto lines strung from apartment window to window. There was a world beyond the tiny, zoomed-in little house him and his father had, down the street. A feeling of contentment had settled so nicely into Billy, shutting down the hum of his fear and frustration, if just for a bit.

Billy remembers his friends promising FaceTime dates. He remembers laughing in their faces bitterly, terrified they'd forget him, so he mentally made the plan to forget them first. They knew what was underneath his laughter—they'd seen him in his weakest moments, sobbing on the floor covered in mucus and piss, his brain having melted away over the diagnosis from his goddamn pediatrician—he was still a child, reminded at every second.

It was his fucking *children's doctor* that told him he was HIV+ from an encounter when he was fourteen. Rushed into sex by an older teen that worked at the ice cream parlor. Ice cream wasn't the same for him for months. Billy could barely swallow his bile whenever he was on the boardwalk, wilting away from the neon colors and the almost-man smiling at him with all his teeth. Billy's friends would hold his hand as he flipped the attendant off, cheering him on every time. He'd wanted to fight him but knew he would lose his job if he was perceived as a threat to other businesses in the immediate area.

Sean and Billy had always talked about their futures. Billy wanted to be a lifeguard, watching the kiddies tripping over sand and hopping over waves. It'd be fun for him to blow a whistle and yell at people. Sean would always laugh, shaking his head at the idea. He was more interested in creating and crafting, building with his hands for the benefit of others. Enamored, Billy fell further in love with each passing month, grateful to have so much love in his life—right up until it was time to leave.

Billy had read somewhere that loving someone meant letting them go when it was time. He let Maxine go, not long after they met, and she

had turned to cutting him with her words, hurting him the way he hurt her, going stony every time he was pushed to drive her somewhere or chaperone her around the boardwalk. It killed Billy inside to know that he was hurting her, but knew it was for the best that she didn't know what was going on. He did the same with Sean. Agreeing to let him go, agreeing for them each to not promise a future of unknowns when there were so many obstacles between them. There was plenty to remember him by, even if he didn't have broken ribs—Billy would bring them all with him, as heavy as they were on his heart. He pressed a kiss to Sean's temple, hugging him tightly when it was their final day together. They had spent it surfing, tasting the salty water of their tears, pretending it was ocean when it wasn't.

Billy would never forget Sean's labored expression. Sean was going to do amazing things, had plans to do community work, be an educator, work with local kids, and Billy wasn't going to see it. Billy would never know the feel of Sean's hand in his, would never see the joy in his love, his friend, his partner's face, at the fact that he was changing lives for the better. Gritting his teeth, Billy closed his eyes, staunching his tears before he left Sean and went home for the final time.

By the time he got back everything was packed up except for his own clothes and other personal items. Tears clouded his vision as he sniffled his way through packing everything that belonged to him. It all fit into one suitcase. Jessie would have never left the west coast if Billy ever knew her at all. Sometimes, he wondered if he did, but with the time they had together, she would have rather left his father, dragging Billy behind her, than leave California entirely.

Billy sat on the roof the evening they were set to leave, staring at the stars and whispering to Jessie's ashes, which had been scattered in the cold Pacific water.

"I'll miss you, Mom."

With the water cycle, Billy knew that wherever he went, his mom would follow, but it didn't lessen the pain. He saw her in his reflection, in the constellations he created, in the art he made. Her softness would remain in his heart, inextricably linked forever.

Always and forever.

Their car was packed to the brim that night, a trailer lugging their furniture. Anything left behind would belong to the new owners, the house having sold in a heartbeat due to its close-to-the-beach location and killer granite countertops. Avoiding the cliché of looking wistfully backward, Billy resolutely reminded himself to stay strong, if not for anyone other than Maxine. He looked down at his phone and tried to ignore Sean's messages:

I will always love you Billy

just call me whenever

we'll always have a bond

He couldn't help but respond with a simple:

i love u

Billy turned off his phone to cry to himself as he drove behind Neil's truck, coupled with its trailer.

Author's Note:

let me know if you like this! i'm not sure how long this will be, but i'm really really excited about it.

@argylesweaters on tumblr